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Student organisation as a facet of teaching quality in sub-Saharan Africa: evidence to inform the World Bank's *Teach* observation instrument

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Abstract: In a global policy context which calls for 'inclusive and equitable quality education...for all' (SDG4), this paper considers the potential of the World Bank's new *Teach* instrument to promote inclusive education in sub-Saharan Africa. *Teach* was developed for use in low- and middle-income countries as a means of collecting data on classroom practices at scale and identifying individual teachers' professional development needs. It takes the form of an observation checklist to 'distinguish between effective and ineffective teaching' (Molina et al. 2018a). The potential of this tool to promote inclusive practices will be of interest to policy actors, practitioners, researchers and others working in the region.

There is an understandable appeal to developing a single instrument for measuring teaching quality around the world; however, the specification of 'effective teaching' in any particular context requires recognition of local socio-cultural and material realities. Analysis of the *Teach* framework reveals minimal engagement with evidence from classrooms in sub-Saharan Africa. A review of research from the region highlights the organisation of students as an important factor in the inclusiveness of provision, and the key role played by students themselves in supporting the learning of disadvantaged peers, including children with disabilities and linguistic minorities. Recommendations are made for incorporating these overlooked elements in future revisions of the *Teach* instrument, and for further research into peer support practices in the region.

Keywords: disadvantaged learners; effective teaching; inclusive education; peer learning; student organisation; sub-Saharan Africa; *ubuntu*; World Bank

1. Introduction

The paper starts by introducing the World Bank's *Teach* lesson observation instrument before exploring the evidence base for this instrument using bibliometric analysis. Following this, I review evidence from classrooms in sub-Saharan Africa, focusing on the relationship between student organisation and the inclusiveness of provision for disadvantaged groups.

What is Teach?

Teach is a lesson observation instrument developed by the World Bank in order to measure and improve the quality of teaching in low- and middle-income countries (Molina et al. 2018a). It is a tool for collecting data on classroom practices at scale and identifying individual teachers' professional development needs. It takes the form of a checklist which can be used to 'distinguish between effective and ineffective teaching' based on a 30-minute lesson observation (p.ii). Training in the use of *Teach* takes four days, and the instrument is designed to be usable by individuals without teaching experience. The instrument is open source and can be freely used and adapted.

An observer uses the checklist in a lesson to record their observations of students' engagement ('time on task') and teaching practices. Teaching practices are divided into three domains: *Classroom Culture*, *Instruction* and *Socioemotional Skills*, each of which contains 7 or more statements, for example:

- 'The teacher acknowledges positive student behaviour'
- 'The teacher sets clear behavioural expectations for classroom activities'
- 'The teacher explicitly articulates the objectives of the lesson'
- 'The teacher encourages goal setting'

For each statement, teaching practices are identified as 'effective', 'somewhat effective' or 'ineffective' based on descriptors provided.

The value of using lesson observation templates for judgments of teaching quality is debated (see O’Leary & Wood 2017). Rather than rehearsing these arguments, I wish to engage constructively with the *Teach* tool as I believe such an instrument has the potential to collect valuable evidence from classrooms in the region which can inform decision-making in the areas of teacher education, school improvement, and other contexts of practice. In particular, evidence from classrooms can be used alongside learning data to inform strategies for improving the outcomes and experiences of disadvantaged groups for whom the status quo is often inadequate, including children with disabilities, linguistic minorities and first generation learners (Tassew et al. 2017; Takyi-Amoako & Assié-Lumumba 2018). Evidence from sub-Saharan Africa linking classroom practice to learning outcomes is a crucial gap in the literature (Ngware et al. 2014; Frost & Little 2014; Rose et al. 2019, p.19). The contribution of this paper is to identify salient aspects of classroom practice which should be captured in an observational instrument.

Not only is *Teach* used to record (some of) what happens in the classroom, but it is also intended as a tool for identifying individual teachers’ professional development needs. As Alexander (2000) notes, it is important to distinguish between these two functions of an observation checklist – one *descriptive*, for the study of teaching; the other *prescriptive*, promoting certain practices (presumably based on rigorous, relevant evidence). The *prescriptive* function of *Teach* is problematic given the gaps in the evidence base mentioned above. The validity of *Teach* as a prescriptive tool relies on universal statements about what ‘effective teaching’ is, across subject areas, age groups, proficiency levels and national boundaries. This is challenged by decades of research indicating that the efficacy of teaching practices varies by subject area (Lock et al. 2018), learners’ proficiency (Kirschner et al. 2006) and socio-cultural context (Nguyen-Phuong-Mai 2019), amongst other factors.

Researchers in the field of comparative and international education have stressed the importance of the socio-cultural and material contexts of teaching (Alexander 2000; Tabulawa 2003, 2013; Barrett 2007; Schweisfurth 2013; Guthrie 2018). In the past, the World Bank and other Northern agencies have been criticised for advocating pedagogical approaches in sub-Saharan Africa without due consideration of local cultures, as if teaching were ‘value-free and merely technical’, rather than a socially-situated activity grounded in meanings, values and relationships (Tabulawa 2003). Sonaiya (2002) describes this as the ‘myth of cultural neutrality’ (p.112). Benjamin Piper (2016), whose work will be familiar to many participants at UKFIET, argues that ‘ignoring culture and community’ (p.107) is the main reason for the failure of Northern-led interventions in the region. In considering the prescriptive function of *Teach*, then, we should ask whether it is informed by evidence and scholarship from the region.

2. Exploring the evidence base: To what extent is *Teach* informed by African education research?

To address this question, I turned to the background paper for *Teach*, titled *Evidence-Based Teaching: Effective Teaching Practices in Primary School Classrooms* (Molina et al. 2018b) which is described as a synthesis of ‘the evidence regarding effective teaching practices in primary school classrooms, with special focus on evidence from low- and middle-income countries.’

The References section contains 306 citations. Using a random number generator, I selected 63 (20.6%) of these, retrieved a copy of each publication, and recorded the geographical location of both the *authors* and the *evidence base*. I found that the 63 studies were authored by 149 researchers based in 10 countries. Three-quarters of the authors lived in the USA and the remainder in other high-income countries in the Global North (Table 1).

Table 1 Location of researchers cited in the *Teach* framework

Country of residence	# of researchers	% of total researchers
USA	111	74.5%
UK	10	6.8%

South Korea	6	4.1%
Germany	4	2.7%
New Zealand	4	2.7%
Canada	4	2.7%
Netherlands	3	2.0%
Australia	3	2.0%
Belgium	3	2.0%
Denmark	1	0.7%

Source: The author, based on a random sample of 20% of references in Molina et al. 2018b

Similarly, the evidence base for the studies in this sample was exclusively from the Global North. More than half (51%) of these were psychology studies, which is the disciplinary background of three of the report's four authors, the other being an economist.

There are limitations to this analysis. Analysing all of the references rather than a sample would have been preferable. Indeed, some research evidence from Africa *was* cited in the document, including a publication by African-based researchers which fell outside the sample. Nevertheless, this approach was sufficient to address my question – 'To what extent is *Teach* informed by African education research?' Not much. Guthrie (2019) independently reached the same conclusion. In the circumstances it is not clear what was meant by the World Bank's claim that a 'special focus' was given to evidence from the Global South.

3. Reviewing evidence from sub-Saharan Africa on the inclusiveness of provision for disadvantaged groups: a focus on student organisation

This review of evidence from sub-Saharan Africa draws from my experience working with schools in the region since 2007, initially in teacher education, and later in research and evaluation, including an ethnographic case study of a government primary school in Ethiopia (Mitchell 2017a, 2017b, 2019) and helping to develop the [African Education Research Database](#), an online inventory of scholarship from the region (Mitchell & Rose 2018; Rose et al. 2019).

To engage constructively with the *Teach* tool and its potential to promote inclusive education in the region, I focus on an issue about which *Teach* is currently silent and can therefore be taken as a priority for inclusion in subsequent revisions, namely: the organisation of students. This is an aspect of teaching practice which 'most merit[s] attention in empirical study, professional training and strategies for school improvement' (Alexander 2000, p.321).

The review of evidence from the region indicates that *a teaching quality framework which overlooks the organisation of students in the classroom is inadequate to assess the inclusiveness of provision for disadvantaged groups*. In particular, student organisation affects the quality of provision with respect to *social integration and peer learning*.

3.1 Social integration

The organisation of students in the classroom can promote social integration or reinforce divisions. This is particularly notable for children with disabilities, who experience stigma and social exclusion in many parts of the region (Ani et al. 2011; Tungalaza 2012; Mariga et al. 2014; Ewa 2015; Bannink et al. 2016; Setume 2016). Classroom seating can reinforce segregation. For example, Ngcobo and Muthukrishna (2011) describe practices at a primary school in rural South Africa where students are organised into 'traffic light' groups based on teachers' judgements of their ability. Students with physical disabilities are automatically allocated to the red group for 'Learners with Special Educational Needs', which serves to 'spatially contain, regulate and reinforce difference' (p.363). By contrast, studies from Botswana, Kenya, Uganda and elsewhere provide evidence of teachers

organising classroom seating in ways which promote social integration (Mukhopadhyay et al. 2012; Elder et al. 2016; Smith et al. 2017).

In some contexts, formal seating arrangements are used in ways which mix students by ability, gender, religion and socio-economic status. An example of this is the ‘one-to-five’ student network system which has operated in Ethiopian government schools since 2010 (Nigusse Weldemariam & Tsegaye Girmay 2015). Figure 1 shows how the network system mixes students by gender, religion and ‘rank’ (i.e. academic grades) in one Grade 7 class.

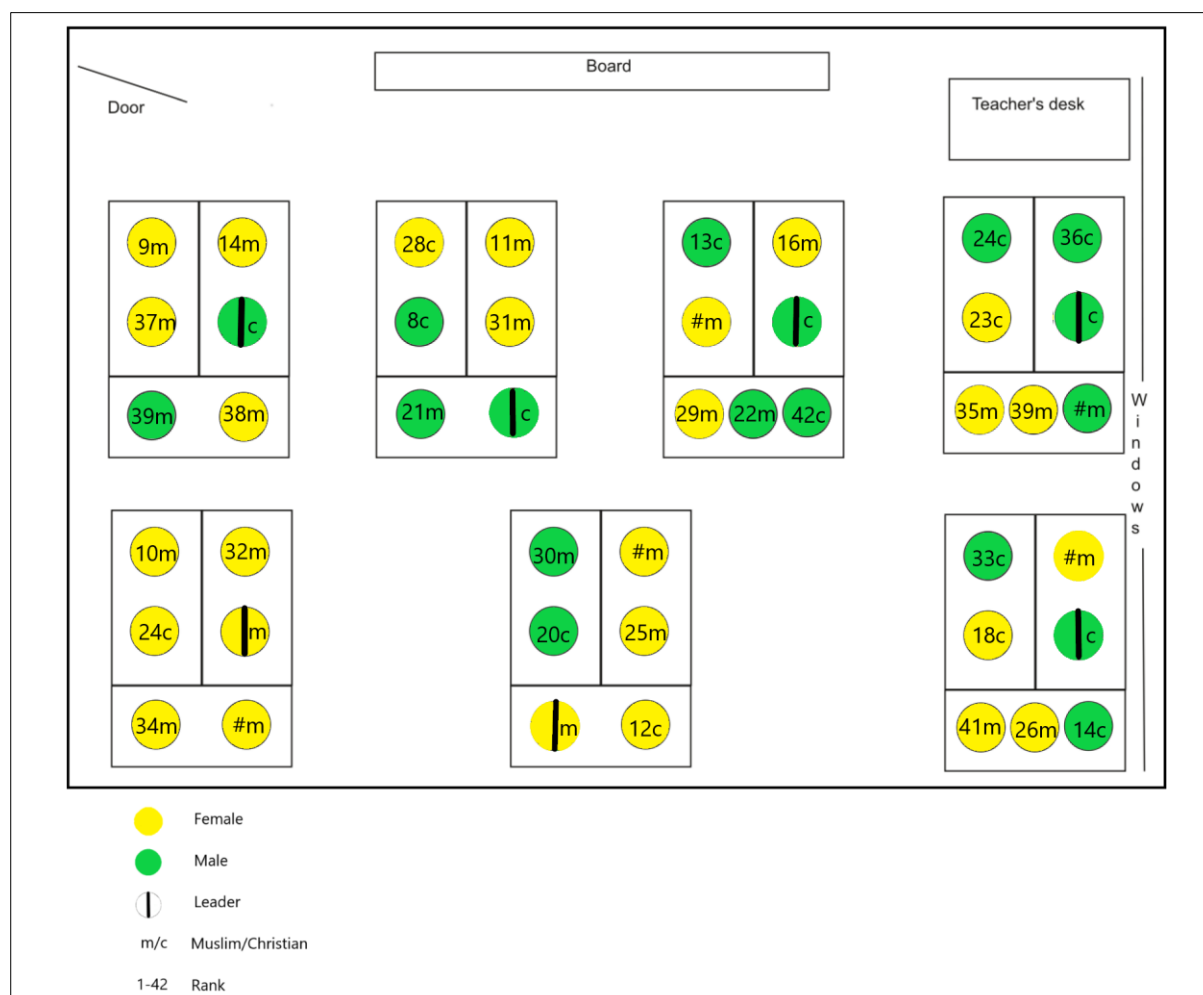


Figure 1. The organisation of a Grade 7 classroom in Ethiopia based on the one-to-five student network system

Tools already exist for evaluating the social integration of disadvantaged students, such as the *Index for Inclusion* which has been used in South Africa (Engelbrecht et al. 2006) and Tanzania (Polat 2011) and the *Inclusive Education Matrix* in Uganda (Smith et al. 2017). In developing an observational instrument it is important to recognise that variations in conditions are a challenge to any universal pronouncements about what effective practice looks like. For example, seating plans are not universally viable across the region (e.g. Kuchah and Smith 2012). It should also be remembered that social integration must be balanced against other considerations, such as the benefits which students with visual or auditory impairments may derive from physical proximity to the teacher and/or board (Lynch et al. 2014; Smith et al. 2017; Sithole 2018).

3.2 Peer learning

Teach advocates peer collaboration as a means of fostering students' 'socioemotional learning'. However, the framework wholly overlooks the central role which students themselves often play in relation to the learning of disadvantaged peers. Peer support mechanisms in the region are consistent with the African belief system of *Ubuntu* (Waghid & Smeyers 2012; Phasha et al. 2017; Takyi-Amoako & Assié-Lumumba 2018) which highlights the 'interconnectedness in the needs, rights, obligations, and well-being' of all members of the community (Assie-Lumumba 2017, p.12).

In Table 2 I synthesise evidence from the region to provide an overview of different roles students play in supporting the learning of disadvantaged peers. These roles are located on a continuum indicating the nature and extent of support.

Table 2 Student roles in relation to supporting disadvantaged groups

Student roles	Disadvantaged groups	Nature/extent of support →		
		(Accessing the curriculum)	(Engaging with the curriculum)	(Teaching the curriculum)
Translators	Linguistic minorities – Botswana (Mokibelo 2016) Students with auditory and/or visual impairments – Kenya (Elder et al. 2016), Botswana (Mukhopadhyay et al. 2012)	-----		
Buddies	Orphans – Malawi (Jukes et al. 2014) Children with disabilities – Uganda (Smith et al. 2017), Tanzania (McConkey & Lariga 2011)	-----		
Group work facilitators	Students lacking confidence to speak in whole class settings in Ethiopia (Nigusse Weldemariam & Tsegay Girmay 2015; Mitchell 2019) Less active students – Cameroon (Kuchah & Smith 2012) Children with disabilities – Tanzania (McConkey & Lariga 2011)	-----		
Peer teachers	'Weak students' – Eritrea (Yonas Mesfun Asfaha & Kroon 2011) Disadvantaged students - Nigeria (Ewa 2016)	-----		

Source: The author

Evidence from the region is summarised below in relation to the nature of peer support for disadvantaged groups.

Accessing the curriculum. Research reports students acting as *translators* for their peers, providing access (however basic) to the curriculum, for example by translating teachers' instructions for peers who face barriers as a result of language or sensory impairments. In rural Botswana, Mokibelo (2016) finds classrooms where teachers do not share a common language with many of their students, some of whom 'neither speak nor understand the languages of instruction' (p.179). Communication strategies adopted in these contexts include students translating for their peers, although Mokibelo is sceptical of these young learners' capacity to do so accurately.

Elsewhere there is evidence of students performing similar roles for peers with visual or hearing impairments. For example, a study in Kenyan primary schools (Elder et al. 2016) reports teachers 'pairing' children with sensory impairments with non-disabled peers in order to provide ongoing assistance (p.424). In Botswana Mukhopadhyay et al. (2012) reports that students with hearing impairments rely on their peers to explain teachers' instructions using 'home signs' (i.e. an improvised gestures). As one teacher explained: 'Since I am not trained in sign language I am depending on these kids to explain the concepts to her.' (p.6) Across all of these cases we can question the adequacy of primary-age students providing effective access to the curriculum for disadvantaged peers.

Engaging with the curriculum. Beyond access, there is evidence of peer learning strategies to promote disadvantaged students' engagement with the curriculum. This often involves academically stronger (usually described as more 'active' students) working with peers (Kuchah & Smith 2012; Mitchell 2019). The student network system in Ethiopia is an example of this (see Figure 1). This endogenous pedagogical strategy involves teachers recruiting top-ranking students to support the five or six peers at their desk. These 'network leaders' serve as academic authorities (explaining tasks and content, sharing work); group-work facilitators (managing group discussions, encouraging participation); and behavioural models (modelling appropriate behaviour, regulating peers' conduct). The small group setting created by the network system is particularly important for students who lack the confidence to express themselves in a whole-class setting (Nigusse & Tsegay 2015; Mitchell 2017a, p.167).

Teaching the curriculum. This review uncovered evidence of peer teaching strategies to support the learning of disadvantaged students in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda and elsewhere. Peer teaching is sometimes described as a means of facilitating engagement with the curriculum. For example, in rural government primary schools in Nigeria, Ewa (2016) describes peer teaching as a means of:

'[managing] a classroom of diverse learners including children with impairments and learning difficulties. Peer tutoring [provides] opportunities for the school to accommodate diverse learners and increased response opportunities for the children, [ensuring] additional time for positive feedback and [maximising] the amount of time the learner is on-task.' (p.245)

Peer teaching can also involve students directly imparting knowledge and skills to their peers, for example, 'good students [showing] the weaker ones how to write' (Yonas Mesfun Asfaha & Kroon 2011, p.234).

4. Discussion

Despite claims of *Teach* giving a 'special focus' to evidence from the Global South, this study reveals a lack of engagement with research evidence from sub-Saharan Africa. This is problematic as it means that the prescriptive aspects of the tool (i.e. claims relating to effective teaching) are not grounded in the socio-cultural and material realities of classrooms in the region.

Of course, this is not the first time a powerful Northern-based agency has sought to shape policy and practice in the region without due consideration of local perspectives and evidence (Tabulawa 2003;

Sriprakash et al. 2019; Read 2019). Historically, accessing research evidence from sub-Saharan Africa could be a challenge (Maclure 2006), but this is no longer the case. The past 20 years have seen a steady increase in international peer-reviewed publications from the region (Mitchell & Rose 2017), and the African Education Research Database is one means of locating relevant research.

This review is not a synthesis of evidence of ‘effective teaching’ in the region, but groundwork towards the development of such an evidence base. The study identifies salient aspects of practice which should be captured in observational instruments in order to develop understandings about what works and for whom. In particular, the review highlights the overlooked role which students themselves play in supporting the learning of disadvantaged peers. This is consistent with a cultural view of students as a classroom ‘resource’, with shared responsibility for collective goals (Takyi-Amoako & Assié-Lumumba 2018; Mitchell 2019). Nevertheless, we might also question the adequacy of such arrangements. Should students from linguistic minorities or those with sensory impairments be reliant on peers in order to access the curriculum? Can such arrangements fulfil their right to a quality, inclusive education? Both the prevalence and efficacy of the forms of peer support outlined in this paper require further research, as do practical strategies for supporting students in their roles as translators, buddies, facilitators and peer teachers.

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